

Boy Blue's Verses



Frederick Balmer Watt

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very best wishes
to Mr. Pierce
Leitch B. Watt



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BOY BLUE'S VERSES



Frederick Balmer Watt

*Royal Naval Canadian
Volunteer Reserve*



*Edmonton, Alberta
1918*

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Introduction

These verses have been collected by the parents of the writer while he is on active service and published in response to the request of numerous friends who have been interested in his work. While still in the middle 'teens he responded to the call for naval recruits and, with several thousand other young Canadians, has been engaged in convoying and mine-sweeping work in the North Sea and the English Channel. As a memento of their contribution to our war effort it has been thought that this little volume might be of interest.

The manner in which these inland-bred boys have adapted themselves to seafaring has been widely commented upon. In one of his early letters as official Canadian Press correspondent overseas Mr. Stewart Lyon, the editor of the *Toronto Globe*, sent from Halifax a sketch of one of these recruits.

"He is a young Canadian," Mr. Lyon wrote, "born in Edmonton of English parents. He never saw the sea till this morning. He never saw a vessel bigger than the little steamers that ply the Saskatchewan. Yet he comes aboard without the slightest perturbation. The salt sea air, the great ship, the heaving water are his racial inheritance. It will take generations of the plains to make landsmen of his breed and create in his descendants distrust of the sea."

Mr. Lyon was not picturing the boy who wrote the verses in this volume. But the words apply to him, with the difference that he came to Edmonton from another inland city when he was four years old and that his forebears have all been Canadians for close to a century.

Some poems written before the war are included. For permission to publish "North Saskatchewan Spring" thanks are due the editor of *The Youth's Companion*, Boston. The introductory verses are included by courtesy of the editor of *The Canadian Magazine*, in the current Christmas number of which they appear.

Boy Blue

Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn
And mount your steed this summer morn!
Your hobby-horse is a charger bold
That takes a strong, little arm to hold.

Rattle-de-bang adown the walk!
Whoa a minute! We want to talk,
Talk of the elves and the fairy prince
And the lad who made the giant wince.

You take my hand and from "our street"
Familiar to your tiny feet,
We pass along through foreign parts,
To where the dear green country starts.

The river bank, the daisy field,
The wooded nook, what joy they yield!
The warbler's note 'mid leafy shade
Allures us further up the glade.

It's time for home; you cry "No! No!"
But, when we turn, our pace is slow;
And ere we reach the beaten track
You're glad to climb upon my back.

* * *

Big Boy Blue, the years have sped
And now you tower above my head!
Another hour and you will slip
Away from home to join your ship.

You go alone; no more we two.
The King has need of men like you.
His call has come to eager ears.
See how my pride has dried my tears!

—A. B. W.

On Leaving England

The English shore-line fades into the night;
Before us lie a thousand leagues of foam;
And then—we forward strain our eager sight—
Fair Canada, our Canada, our home!
There's laughter in each voice and in each heart,
We're in a heaven of delight—and yet,
Think not, old England, though in joy we part,
That there is not a shadow of regret.

For we have seen your might on every coast
And done our little bit to keep you great.
We, as companions of your battle-host,
Walked hand in hand with Death, cast dice with Fate,
Along with your own sons off many a shore;
Convoying, sweeping, ever without pause,
We've added to the stories of the war
And some aid given to the common cause.

Our brothers lie 'neath your encircling seas;
They went out bravely, trusty to the last;
Their voices are in every Channel breeze,
Their victory hymn in every North Sea blast;
Go where you will upon your storm-swept strand,
From Land's End to the rock-bound Shetland Isles,
You'll find their unmarked graves on every hand
Within those waters that the beast defiles.

Dear are those seas of death and bitter cold,
Not for their howling winds nor tossing waves,
But for Canadian hero-dead they hold,
Deep in their simple sailor-warrior graves.
Thus we are bound, old England, bound to thee;
Fetters of steel were never half so true:
As those forged by the sacred memory
Of our dead pals; England, adieu! adieu!

The Shattered Dream

I went aboard his ship the night before
We set out on our lonely long patrol;
We talked of all the things we loved ashore
And quite forgot the cruel North Sea's roll;
He told me of his acres in the west
And what he'd do when we had won the war;
I marvelled at his pioneering zest;
Four magic words, he said them o'er and o'er,
"When I get home."

Next day we left the harbor with the light,
And out to sea we steamed in single line;
Man and machine all ready for the fight
Against destroyer, submarine and mine.
Down in the foremost ship a trimmer toiled,
Feeding his scorching, always-hungry fire
His body stripped, his face all drawn and soiled,
But always in his heart that deep desire
To get back home.

The sun went down and with the dark came wind;
It swept the slaty sea and murky sky;
And ever swiftly on we steamed behind
Our leading ship, whose stern lights all burned high;
And then there came a loud report, a flash;
We looked towards where the guiding lights had shone:
"God help the lad," I cried, for with the crash
I saw our leader's gleaming points were gone,
"He'll not see home."

We searched and searched amid the shrieking gale
But nought we found of our companion craft;
The howling wind was silencing our hail,
I could have sworn the long sleek rollers laughed.
The dawn broke slowly, dreary, cold and gray;
A sharp and icy chill was in the air;
The section, engines stopped, around us lay;
But my mate's ship—we saw it wasn't there.
He'd found another home.

The Nelson Touch

Who said the Nelson spirit
Had gone from England's men?
Who claimed that dashing victories
Would ne'er be won again?
Though guns and ships are different
The men are still the same
As helped the one-eyed Admiral
To win a deathless name;
And of all naval battles
On England's honor roll
Find one that is the equal
Of that fought on the Mole.

Their ships were pocked with shell-holes
From control-top right to keel;
They landed; passed the German guns
And met them steel to steel.
They battled midst the reeking,
The shell-fume poisoned air.
By God, the Nelson spirit
Was in every sailor there!
The Dardanelles and Jutland
The Dogger Bank, the Bight
Could claim no greater triumph
Than that heroic fight.

Men were machines no longer
But, giving blow for blow,
They put the fear of England
In every Hunnish foe.
Here where a stricken sailor,
Shot-riddled, slowly sank,
His rival, a marine, stepped up
To fill the gaping rank.
H. E., machine-gun, shrapnel,
Each took its deadly toll
But each man went out happy
For they'd cleared the Zeebrugge Mole.

And so they left the battered fort,
Their undertaking done,
Its garrison all corpses
And dismantled every gun.

The glorious survivors
Of this the raid of raids
Set back for England followed
By futile fusillades.
And the shells fast shrieking over
Sang the death song of each soul
Who had paid the price for England
On the torn and shattered Mole.

So you who sneer take notice,
Do you not feel some pride
That they were sons of England
Who fought and bled and died?
Say not the old-time daring
Has left the men in blue;
They're willing to give up their all
Just as they used to do.
And, when you feel like scoffing,
Remember once or twice
The tars who on the Zeebrugge Mole
So gladly paid the price.

The Navy to the Army

Comrades! The news of battles won
By you makes us each long to share
Your glorious victories over there;
But we must tend our silent gun.

We would go with you o'er the top
If 'twere not for that slippery eel,
That slinking sea-wolf of the Kiel;
Our post is here and here we stop.

Each gun of yours is belching flame
And dealing death-bolts to the Hun,
While silent is each naval gun—
Silent but ready all the same.

So fight on, comrades, with good cheer—
The luck is yours to strike the foe—
Remember as you face each show
The road to Blighty still is clear.

To Some Petty Officers

Listen to me, you bold A. B.,
You gunner and P. O.
We're going back across the foam
And mighty glad to go.

We didn't shirk the dirty work
We didn't mind the tar
But, P. O., when you cursed us,
Then you went a bit too far.

We're used to wear, we're used to tear
But, though we're out of luck,
We'll have no shame forced on our name,
Each one's a true Canuck.

We sailed the sea and helped keep free
Of mines the Dover strait
And more than one Canadian son
Went bravely to his fate.

But still you cuss and raise a fuss
And tell us to our face
"You bunch of roughs, you lot of toughs,
You are a damn'd disgrace."

No winds that blow and no fierce foe
Dismayed Canadians yet;
No P.O.'s blare that's meant to scare
Makes us the least upset.

To have to fight makes our hearts light;
We've banged the German whelp;
But we're not here to have you swear
We're over here to help.

We do not hate our English mate,
He never was our foe;
The man we shun, just like a Hun,
Is the over-proud P. O.

There're some who know just how to go
About their work; but then
There are a few with naught to do
But terrorize the men.

They hit a rut in "14 hut"
And got extremely sore;
They talked a heap, for talk is cheap,
They cussed and then they swore.

Thank God the most of Britain's host
Are not the same as these;
They are each one a curse upon
The mistress of the seas.

War-sick and Home-sick

I'd be happy if this cruel war were done,
If we'd brought right to his knees the wicked Hun,
If dark and cloudy skies had turned to blue
And I could wander back to home—and you.

I'd be happy if I breathed Canadian air,
If I roamed Canadian woodlands, free from care,
If I idled every summer evening through
With just memories of fighting days—and you.

I'd be happy if I found myself again
At a certain spot within a country lane,
Where I almost think you'd give your promise true
To a sailor—sick of war and sick for you.

I'd be happy were there no such things as Huns,
No shells, no swords, no bayonets, no guns,
And I could say good-bye to ship and crew
To travel back to peace again—and you.

In Lerwick Harbor, Shetland Isles, Christmas, 1917.

The Vanished Day

Thousands on thousands pour o'er the line;
Their pennons gleam and their bayonets shine;
And every tongue in that array
Whispers "The Day, the Day, the Day!"

Thousands on thousands are lying dead,
Their pennons torn and their bayonets red,
But little Belgium's war-scarred clay
Is held by the makers of "The Day."

Thousands and thousands are driving on
Their bayonets bent and their pennons gone,
And ever amid the thickening fray
Mutter: "The Day, the Day, the Day."

Thousands on thousands needs must die
Where the blood-flecked flood of the Marne flows by,
Battling battalions stagger, sway,
Fainter and fainter grows "The Day!"

Thousands on thousands rallying find
The pick of their manhood left behind,
No more triumphant bugles bray
Or men shout praises of "The Day!"

Thousands on thousands hurrying fast
But the trap that we set has caught them at last,
Having no more the lust to slay
Curses bestow they on "The Day".

Thousands and thousands of spectres come,
With bayonets broken and muffled drum;
And their uniforms of bluish grey
Soaked with the blood of the fateful "Day".

A frenzied Kaiser stands aghast
And watches the countless files troop past
Of his vanished legions and takes to flight,
While his thoughts are centred upon "the Night".

Heroes All

There's a mess aboard the "Cornwall" and its number's
forty-eight.

And of all the matelots in it there's not one who isn't
great.

Each and every one's a hero, though the D.C.M.'s are few
For between the crowd they've done each daring deed
there is to do.

There's Pritchard, even though he is a nutty little runt,
He sank a sub and that's a thing they can't do at the front.
The next is Quick who won his fame when cruising off
the Tyne.

He pulled the horns, with his own teeth, from out a float-
ing mine.

Then comes Steve Smith, an R. N. R., who got his dis-
charge ticket

By getting walloped in a scrap when he was out on picket.
MacRobbie and brave Chapman, when they couldn't
get a sub,

Gained notoriety by smashing up a pub.

Now when we come to Yaki Muir with reverence we speak,
For he it was discovered that the rum-cask had a leak.

The next we meet is Mr. Hawke, a rather funny bloke,
He killed five Germans when he told his most amusing joke.
The Corporal of the Gangway is the Johnnty's new white
hope,

He's a most imposing person and his name is Mr. Pope.

When Waldron was on escort, well it really was a treat,
Though we must admit his escort was up good old Union
street.

Noble Simon was as brave a man as ever you could see,
He was Captain of the Head aboard a dashing T. B. D.
Grandpa Gould, with bearing haughty and a look so sharp
and grave,

By force of personality keeps Huns beneath the wave.

Macneil performed the greatest deed in his eventful life,

When with a heart undaunted he took to him a wife.

Of all the fellows in the mess there's none to us is dearer
Than our conjurer and caterer, the noble-hearted Shearer.

While Watt, God bless his little heart, with manner bold
and bluff,

Writes poetry and eats big meals, and that is quite enough.

"If"

(With no apologies to Rudyard Kipling.)

If I were but a pirate bold
A-sailing on the sea,
Whose ship was laden down with gold,
My life would happy be;
Or else a jolly sailor-man
A-fishing from a skiff;
But likely this will ne'er come true
Because it's only "if."

If I were but an Indian
Paddling my birch canoe
On a river swift and wide,
I'd be happy, wouldn't you?
Or a trapper in the north
When the wind was blowing stiff;
But likely this will ne'er come true
Because it's only "if."

If I were but a soldier
A-guard upon a height
I'd be brave as any man
Though I'd likely get a fright,
If some foes rushed through the dark
And came scaling up the cliff;
But likely this will ne'er come true
Because it's only "if."

But when I think, I'm glad I'm not
A pirate with his power and pelf
I'm glad I'm just a little boy
I'm glad I'm just myself.

Edmonton, 1912.

A North Saskatchewan Spring

Alberta's sunniest Spring is here;
The robin sings just like last year
On our fresh-tasseled poplar tree,
Talking to Naomi and me;
While three sweet April sparrows' throats
Throb "yes" in two familiar notes.

The brook far down in our ravine
Runs foamy white, with brown between;
It sings its way right through the hill
To make the fall that turns the mill;
Naomi says—she's only four—
It never sang that song before.

But I am twelve and this Spring breeze
Cooling us through the budding trees,
Which now again are getting green
As if the Winter had not been,
Whispers "Just this way Spring came on
Last year by the Saskatchewan."

And yet there's something very strange
The way the smoke smells drift and change;
The street-cars rumble kind of low
And grown-ups sort of dreamy go;
So I'm not sure but I agree
The Spring's all new with Naomi.

Edmonton, 1913.

To My Sister

How many happy days have you and I,
Under the smiles of a midsummer sky,
Wandered together in the woods of green.
But now those days are few and far between.

Down in the valley by the little stream
We lingered, far away from daylight's gleam,
Amid the poplar and the lofty pine;
And all that little world was yours and mine.

Remember you the hill that was so high
Upon whose summit, sister, you and I
Sat, as we watched what happened down below,
While the wind rocked the trees all to and fro.

Often in dreams I view that glad scene now,
We two together on the steep hill's brow,
Hearing the wind sweep by with solemn hum,
Thinking not of the years that were to come.

But on they creep and, as my boyhood flies,
You and those hills, that forest and those skies
Hourly I see and hear the breezes free
And live again the times that used to be.

Edmonton, 1914.

On Leave

The train dragged slowly on and brought to view
The hill and river that so well I knew;
And all along the grassy heights were ranged
The buildings—hardly one of them was changed.
The same "tin Lizzie" took the hill on high;
The same old street-cars rumbled swiftly by;
The same birds sang amid the same sun's rays
And all was as it was in former days;
And my cracked lips, still salty from the foam,
Whispered the words: "Thank God, it's really home!"

The train stopped with a jerk; again I stood
Upon my own town's soil—oh, it was good,
As on I strode, to hear my well-shod feet
Click on the pavement of the old main street.
Friends seemed to spring from 'neath the ground I trod
Each with a handshake or a cheery nod.
Then up the side-street, with its pleasant shade,
The place where as a kiddie I had played;
At last I reached the house and once again
I climbed its steps; Dad came—and then, oh, then—

But what came after must be kept apart
Deep in a father's or a mother's heart;
Such scenes are meant for only those who yearn
Unceasing for an only son's return.
There's nought besides can truly bring
Balm for the endless months of suffering.

So now at twilight, when the day's work's done,
We send our troubles with the dying sun;
The robin's even song rings strong and clear
As round me sit the ones I hold so dear.
All all is peace, the war has drifted by
Like cloudlets from a wind-swept summer sky.
The haunting shapes of earth's embattled hosts
Have swiftly yielded place like filmy ghosts
And vanished in the fast encircling gloam.
Yes, yes, it's true, I'm really, really home!

Edmonton, August, 1918.

